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ABSTRACT

Scholarship's reliance on humanism as a critical principle is problematic and needs to be called into question. The issue of access in "Computers and Composition" scholarship illustrates how a critical reliance on humanism may actually betray humanist values scholars in the field tend to promote. Scholarship in "Computers and Composition" has cultivated a vision of computer technology as having the power to democratize existing power relationships and to broaden the base of privilege by opening discourse communities to those formerly barred access by gender, class, or race. But the computer empowers only those to whom it is available. While the unequal distribution of computers in the nation's schools presents a formidable barrier to access, scholars realize that solving the problem of access may not be enough. There is a stubborn and widening gap between the humanist vision of computers and the debilitating effects computer technology has on the hope for equal education. The best way to reconcile the technological view of the computer and humanistically formed goals as an educator is to limit the role of computers as much as possible--to esche computer-conferencing software and develop curriculum that introduces students to the computer as, essentially, a fancy typewriter. (Contains 24 references.) (CR)

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"Questioning the Humanist Vision of Computer Technology"

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Yesterday morning, Lester Faigley maintained that, although some of the nobler aspirations of the Enlightenment remain unfulfilled, its ideals continue to provide us with a means of critique. I disagree. In fact, the goal of my presentation today is to unhinge what Carolyn Handa has called the working trio of "computers, writing teachers, [and] humanists" that mark the borders of the field of Computers and Composition (xvii). I mean to convince you that our scholarship's reliance on humanism as a critical principle is problematic, and needs to be called into question. I will look specifically at the issue of access in Computers and Composition scholarship to illustrate how a critical reliance on humanism may actually betray the humanist values scholars in the field intend to promote.

When Ellen Nold exhorted humanists to grasp the opportunity to make computers "multiply the good and wonderous in man" (269), she assumed a shared commitment on the part of English educators to a set of values specific to American liberal humanism. As Corliss Lamont in The Philosophy of Humanism explains, "America's belief in democracy and progress, its buoyant optimism and idealism, its reliance on science and invention, all fit the Humanist pattern" (17). Lisa Gerrard, looking back over "the last twelve years of activity in computers and composition" (23) is

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struck by the consistent values of scholars in the field, who "love democracy," "support an egalitarian pedagogy," "worry about equal access" (26) and have "regarded technological innovation" as a "constructive force" (23). In the scholarship of Computers and Composition, the role of humanism is not restricted to the personal and educational values that scholars in the field espouse; humanism also defines the place of Computers and Composition within English programs, where Cynthia Selfe proposed computerization would "succeed when we identify for the profession our own uniquely humanist vision of computer technology" ("English Teachers" 200). Approaching the machine in a humane manner is essential because, as Deborah Holdstein warns, "we face danger . . . when the humanities by default have little or no say about the direction technology will take in the future or about its enlightened use" (130).

For scholarship in Computers and Composition, then, humanism provides a shared set of values, ensures our academic position within English departments, differentiates us from the technical sciences, and provides the measure of both our pedagogy and our educational goals. Underlying every effort to use computers in the teaching of writing is the humanist belief that, as Corliss Lamont puts it, the "numberless machines and mechanical devices that modern man is able to utilize" can be used in a humanist way to increase "human freedom and control" (Lamont 168).

Scholarship in Computers and Composition has cultivated a vision of computer technology as having "the power to democratize

existing power relationships [and] to broaden the base of privilege by opening discourse communities to those formerly barred access by gender, class, or race" (Farrell xii). While our faith in this humanist vision goes unchallenged, scholars such as Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe complain that our scholarship often fails "to reconcile the differences between a visionary image of technology--what we want computers to do--and our own firsthand observations of how computers are being used in many classrooms around the country" (57). This "difference" between the humanist vision of computers and the reality of their use has always vexed scholarship in Computers and Composition. The history of scholarship in our field is characterized by a series of gaps between our expectations in introducing computers to the writing classroom and the measured or observed results of computerizing composition instruction. Scholars in the field have blamed these gaps on sloppy research methodologies or lack of theory in our scholarship. I believe these gaps are not caused by a lack of rigor or theory in Computers and Composition scholarship so much as they reflect the limits of humanism as critical principle for evaluating our scholarship and our practice. As a specific example, let me look closely at the role of humanism in the issue of access in Computers and Composition scholarship.

In the issue of access, our optimistic faith in the democratizing potential of computer technology is undercut by "the realization that the computer empowers only those to whom it is available" (Farrell xi). The field's "overarching concern . . .

with access" (Farrell xi) is articulated by Elizabeth Klem and Charles Moran, who write:

Access, it seems to us, is the issue that drives all before it. Who has access, and to what? As teachers and researchers, we will have to come to grips with this mixed situation, where some students have full access, and some do not. . . . (146)

In Computers and Composition scholarship, the concern for "access" embraces the range of circumstances in which one's ability to experience the democratizing potential of computer technology is limited. Foremost among these is the unequal distribution of computer technology in America's public schools, where "student access to computers is directly related to the student's ability classification and socioeconomic status" (Kirby et. al. 538). Jonathan Kozol provides an example of the problem in his description of Mackenzie High School in Detroit, where the school district is poor and 89% black. There, he writes:

. . . courses in word processing are taught without word processors. 'We teach the keyboard . . . so, if they ever get on a word processor, they'd know what to do," a high school teacher says. Students ask, "When are we going to get to use computers?" But, their teacher says, the school cannot afford them. (p. 198)

College teachers in the field of Computers and Composition are cognizant of such problems. Paul LeBlanc recognizes that "underlying many of the political issues in computer-based

literacy is the question of money" (35). Providing access to computer technology requires much more than a one-time investment, with ongoing support needed for software, training, supplies, and regular upgrades. To assure equal access to computers in all the nation's schools would require an unprecedented re-distribution of wealth sure to meet with resistance. (Remember Newt Gingrich's ill-fated proposal to create a computer tax-credit for poor families?)

While the unequal distribution of computers in the nation's schools presents a formidable barrier to access, scholars in Computers and Composition realize that even if we could, "solving the problem of access may not be enough" (Wahlstrom 175). This is because, even where they are present, the ways computers are used and who gets to use them are problematic. Mary Louise Gomez observes that "microcomputers have been installed in United States classrooms for over a decade now, yet access to, and use of, the hardware and software remains inequitably differentiated by students' race, social class, language background, and gender" (319). Billie Wahlstrom notes that computer technology and use is "part of a gender-coded system less hospitable to women than it should be" (184). In addition, one study found that in public schools, "the quality of use differed" depending on the socioeconomic status of the school and its students (Kirby et. al. 539), concluding that "the economically disadvantaged student uses the computer as a tool to master skills in other curricular areas while computer literacy skills are mastered by students in higher

SES [socioeconomic status] settings" (541).

The problem of access, then, comprises both the unequal distribution of computer technology, and inequities in the ways computers are used. In Computers and Composition scholarship, the problem of access is treated as an obstacle to realizing the democratizing potential of computers for literacy education. Nancy Kaplan writes that "inequitable access to technology" derives not from "insurmountable problems of current technological know-how" but instead is "grounded in the political and economic arrangements within which systems are designed, developed, and disseminated" (26). Because she doesn't see the problem of access as necessarily "insurmountable," Kaplan is able to imagine a "brave new electronic world" where "anyone with access to the right technology" will be able to participate in the "free flow of information from all to all" (21). A solution to the problem of access then seems possible, if improbable: to realize the humanist vision of computers, we need to increase and equalize access to computer technology. But scholars in the field are beginning to realize that increasing the presence of computers--while easing the problem of access--may not produce the promised democratizing effects.

Cynthia Selfe and Richard Selfe have come to see that the use of computers in education can actually result in the "marginalization of certain groups of students, including among them: women, non-whites, and individuals who speak languages other than English" (481). As Betsy Bowen explains, "because

telecommunications requires extra resources, it exacerbates a problem computers always present: how to make these special opportunities widely available" (9). And Jane Zeni sees "a clear danger" of "electronic tools widening the gap between rich and poor, male and female, black and white, urban and suburban" (83). In a telling example of the "widening gap" Zeni warns of, an article in last month's New York Times describes an educational grant offered by MIPS Technologies, a large microchip manufacturer. The corporation fully expected school "principals to put computers, software and other high-tech equipment at the top of their wish lists" (Newman B1)

But the application that impressed them the most was from a school in Brooklyn. It told of students sitting on broken chairs or windowsills, of a shortage of desks and bookshelves, and of the principal's records being kept in rusty file drawers that were hard to open and nearly impossible to close. Intermediate School 220 in Brooklyn's Sunset Park won the search for a worthy school hands down, and yesterday the company awarded its principal, Beverly McCormick, a check for $55,060. It will be used to buy furniture and other necessities. (B1).

As Ron Bernal, the president of MIPS Technologies, said, "If you can't even get the fundamentals, it's hard to get the rest of it" (B1). The school's principal encourages other educators to apply for private money "otherwise," she says, "you will starve to death in a world of plenty" (B8).

Despite our best intentions, then, the presence of computers actually increases the inequality inherent in America's educational system. This realization should, it seems to me, shake our faith in the humanist vision of computers. Despite the many barriers to full and equal access, however, scholarship in Computers and Composition continues to describe computers in terms of their promise and potential. Gomez affirms that "the use of computers could be instrumental in implementing improved practices of teaching and learning writing" (318); Wahlstrom reiterates that "in the abstract, networks can enfranchise great numbers of people" (175). Klem and Moran continue to believe that computer technology "may be a force for democracy" (134) because "the computer holds the promise--elusive as this promise may now seem--of benefits to writers who have been marginalyzed" (133).

Examining the issue of access reveals the stubborn and widening gap between the humanist vision of computers promoted by scholars in Computers and Composition studies, and the debilitating effects computer technology actually has on the hope for equal education. As Ellen Barton writes, our scholarship supports the idea that "the use of technology can enhance pedagogy and expand literacy," yet research also reveals how "the use of technology can contribute to the maintenance of unequal relations of power and authority." She locates the "crux of this paradoxical situation [back]. . . in the unequal distribution of technological resources in literacy education" (73).

And so our scholarship is caught in this paradox. The

humanist vision of computers shows how technology can promote democracy and equality, but the way computers are distributed and used in our educational institutions works against these values. This paradox is more than a scholarly inconsistency--for practitioners of computers and composition, it is a personal, ethical crisis. Mary Louise Gomez reminds us, "As makers of opportunities, teachers and researchers must be concerned with issues of equity as they relate to computer access and use for all learners" (320). But how are we to show this concern when the humanist vision we promote actually contributes to the inequities we descry?

In his study of ethics in Nietzsche, Foucault, and Heidegger, Charles Scott writes that "Our normal esteem for commitment and passionate concern may well be among those attitudes that produce values opposite to the values that we intend to cultivate" (4). In Computers and Composition scholarship, we have promoted and used computers for teaching writing precisely out of our commitment to the humanist values we intended to cultivate in our students and in our classrooms: democracy, inclusion, equality. In the larger context, however, our humanist vision of computer technology produces the opposite effects, increasing social and political stratification because of the unequal distribution and use of computers in education. We may share William Wresch's wish to "create a world in which every person can access a computer" (191), but even universal access will not resolve this paradox. An effective and ethical response to the paradox of access must

begin by questioning our relationship to humanism.

As a field, we have counted on humanism to provide a critical framework for our actions, and a measure of the effectiveness of our contributions. But it is our commitment to humanism that creates the paradox of access, wherein the humanist vision we promote actually produces values that we abhor. Humanism provides the grand narrative in which technology is seen as a sign of human innovation and progress; humanism provides the values by which we aspire to put technology to "good" use. But when we see that technology produces effects opposite to those democratic results we had hoped for, humanism can not provide a critical perspective for analyzing the paradox of access.

Until we address ourselves to the ethical consequences that result from a humanist vision of computers, our scholarship lies open to the charge of hiding behind humanist rhetoric as we further our own professional goals; we have little answer to Nancy Kaplan's observation that, as the "highly privileged employees of institutions of higher education. . . . with easy access and the requisite know-how [we may] simply constitute a new elite" (24-5). As Charles Scott writes, to question ethics means "an interruption in an ethos, an interruption in which the definitive values that govern thought and everyday action lose their power and authority to provide immediate certainty in their functions" (4). To question the way in which our scholarship relies on humanist assumptions, we must interrupt our relationship to humanism.

In my own work, I rely on a Heideggarian perspective of

technological enframing to envision computers as a technology for the efficient production, distribution, and use of texts. In this view, computers pose all the dangers of increased surveillance and commodification, but hold little promise for democracy and inclusion. I use this--some would say pessimistic or determinist--perspective to make ethically informed local descisions about the role of computers in the composition program I administer. I have found the best way to reconcile my technological view of the computer and my more humanistically informed goals as an educator is to limit the role of computers as much as possible, eschewing computer-conferencing software and developing curriculum that introduces students to the computer as, essentially, a fancy typewriter (van Alkemade). My approach may seem reactionary (and there's more to my program than I have time to discuss today) but it is consistent with the ethical framework I have developed as an alternative to the prevailing humanist vision.

Each of us must develop our own unique perspectives in tune with the local conditions in which we work. But as we begin together to question our humanist assumptions and the ways in which humanism has shaped our vision of computer technology, we begin the ethical questioning that our scholarship calls for.

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